

The Missing Component of U.S. Strategic Communications

By WILLIAM M. DARLEY

In the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, a few prescient political observers began asserting that the United States had found itself thrust into a war that would not only require military action, but also, more importantly, compel the Nation to compete in a so-called war of ideas.¹ However, the U.S. Government was generally slow to understand the nature of the conflict, slow to acknowledge its lack of capability for dealing with such a conflict, and agonizingly slow to marshal itself robustly for that dimension of the conflict. Shockingly, almost 6 years after the attacks against the Twin Towers and Pentagon, a national-level process for organizing and conducting an effective, synchronized program aimed at countering enemy ideas is still not in place. Therefore, many observers both in and out of government are now expressing deep concern that the United States is losing both the global war of ideas against Islamic extremists and the war on terror itself.

Growing concern that we are losing the war of ideas has led to consternation and fierce debate among many offices of government over why progress has been so slow and what to do about it. But to date, this debate has produced little beyond a huge volume of PowerPoint slides, issue papers, and studies, with few actual measures taken to develop a synchronized, coordinated interagency national program—and an effort well short of the robust capabilities the United States possessed in the Central Intelligence Agency and the now-defunct U.S. Information Agency during the Cold War, both of which were key to winning the ideological dimension against Marxism/Leninism in the Soviet Union.²

Instead, the wrangling has focused mainly on tinkering with the mechanics of coordination, attempting to solve the problem by creating an overarching national-level

coordination steering group to produce something generally described as “strategic communications.” However, so far, efforts to create such a system have largely been thwarted by interagency disagreement over what constitutes appropriate and legitimate strategic communications activities, with the most strident objections coming from the public affairs community, which fears absorption into a national propaganda machine. More importantly, such an innovation has met broad resistance by non-Department of Defense (DOD) agencies in general because they are wary of effectively being brought under DOD control in such an effort.

One consequence of this impasse is the assertion of some government leaders that the principal cause of this national failure to communicate strategically is the incompetence of the Government’s professional communicators. For example, former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld claimed that the failure of strategic communications was largely due to government public affairs officers who were not sufficiently trained to fight the war of ideas on a global scale or not sufficiently engaged in proactively developing the required 24/7 system to match enemy initiatives and engagement in the global information environment.³ Partly in response, a number of initiatives have been launched among many agencies aimed at developing public affairs officers who are more sophisticated in dealing with international communications.



Joint Staff Deputy Director for Operations updates press on Afghanistan and Iraq

DOD (Robert D. Ward)



U.S. Navy (Dave Kaylor)

Commander of Naval Sea Systems gives TV interview on Navy's role in war on terror



San Francisco Bay Area Independent Media Center

Why the U.S. Government has had such difficulty conveying its own strategic messages in the current political and social environment, however, is not explained mainly by its failure to develop interagency bureaucratic mechanisms, by interagency rivalry, or even by flawed style. Moreover, failure to create a 24/7 global communications system with appropriately trained public affairs personnel is only symptomatic of the *real* problem, not causal. Rather, the principal reason is a failure at the national level to find interagency agreement among the various departments and branches of government on the substance of what we want national strategic communications to convey to audiences of interest, and with what sense of urgency. This major flaw is specifically noted in the 9/11 Commission Report with regard to its communications policies: “The U.S. Government must define what its message is, what it stands for.”⁴

Therefore, national-level failure to agree on *what* the United States stands for (that is, what national values strategic communications should reflect) is the principal impediment to developing a synchronized and effective program of strategic communications. Moreover, of perhaps greater concern, the root cause of the bureaucratic impasse on strategic communications reflects a deeper lack of consensus on what our national values in fact are.

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Strategic Values?

What is a *value*? Basically, values are reified (that is, an abstract concept accepted as if it were concrete reality) social mores inculcated within a social community that serve as communal governors of social behavior. Such reified values create the core social compact of agreement that shapes what the collective community comes to view as right behavior as opposed to wrong. Relative to other factors, values are at once among the most powerful dynamics governing human social behavior, and the most fragile, since their authority rests entirely on a foundation of collective community faith that they are correct and true principles. Consequently, one generation's values often become another generation's biases and bigotry. The basically whimsical foundation of values thus renders them vulnerable to the shifting sand of cultural change that shapes what becomes accepted as right behavior.

The vulnerability of values can easily be seen in the changes to those values that were regarded as the bedrock of homogenous national mores two generations ago. For example, the American populace generally

agreed that English was the "right and proper" language of the United States. So deeply ingrained was learning English that at the turn of the 20th century, new immigrants often forbade their children to use or learn the native language so they would rapidly become Americanized; learning English was regarded as a prerequisite value for becoming "a real American." However, today, with a flood of immigrants who increasingly resist surrendering their former language or culture on arriving in America and who are aided by various agents in society that promote cultural diversity as opposed to cultural homogeneity as the preferred national social value, the view that English should be the standard language is rapidly losing status as an accepted American value—and in fact is now widely labeled as a form of intrusive bigotry.

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Other abstractions once broadly accepted as important components of the American values system are similarly being challenged, creating uncertainty with regard to national consensus on common values. For example, the assertion by our government that part of our purpose for fighting in Iraq is to help establish personal freedom and protect human dignity is evolving to mean something different than it did two generations ago. Fighting for personal freedom, for many in the United States, may now mean that we as a nation are fighting the insurgents in Iraq for the purpose of legitimizing homosexuality and homosexual marriage as appropriate lifestyles and institutions in the Islamic world as part and parcel of the changes to traditional interpretations of family and marriage that are being championed within America by many agents and interest groups. Assuming that tolerance and acceptance of so-called alternative lifestyles eventually do become a broadly accepted American national value, the problem then becomes how to shape strategic communications messages to persuade a conservative Islamic world that largely eschews homosexuality as a legitimate value, even as they observe the drama of confusing

and vitriolic values-based conflicts over this issue in the United States and Western Europe.

Similarly, our government periodically asserts that we are fighting in Iraq for freedom of speech and expression. In practice, the Islamic world frequently interprets this to mean that America is sending combatants to die in the conflict in order to promote the protection and distribution of graphic Internet pornography or to promulgate "Hollywood values" that not only countenance but also promote adultery, infidelity, and promiscuity. Or the Islamic world interprets this as an extension of perceived U.S. devotion to secularism to promote the environment for establishing an ACLU-equivalent organization in Middle Eastern states that will one day aim to remove the Koran—as well as Allah—from Islamic public life, public discourse, and public institutions. The above perspective of prospective target audiences for strategic messages noted, the issue before our government then becomes, "Are these in fact accurate representations of the national values that we wish to impart to foreign audiences as justification for fighting in Iraq and elsewhere?"

In stark contrast to the confusing scene of a values system in apparent chaos, our enemies' messages are simple and specific as they describe the normative values that will prevail with regard to homosexuality, promiscuity, and secular atheism under a new worldwide order governed by a Caliphate and Islamic law. Consequently, in contrast to our own, the enemy's strategic messages are clear, unambiguous, and (to many) extremely appealing as compared to the inchoate and unnerving confusion over what U.S. strategic messages actually intend to advocate.

The above examples briefly illustrate that the essence of strategic communications programs and resulting messages is not psychological trickery, elegant rhetoric, or manicured ways to say something persuasively clever—that is, not style. It is first and foremost the actual product of values held by the society. Strategic communications are the expression of the fruit that grows from the soil of national values. So-called communications that do not convey specific normative expectations rooted in such national values are quickly dismissed as counterfeit by foreign target audiences.

As a result, the war in Iraq and Afghanistan must be understood as being inextricably linked to our ongoing domestic conflict over defining and agreeing on national values.

Former Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs Victoria Clarke holds her first Pentagon press briefing a week before 9/11



DOD (Helene C. Stikkel)

Thus, it is the indecisive nature of this struggle that best accounts for the impasse within our national government over a strategic communications system and plan.

The above brings into relief the key impediment to strategic communications for the United States. Popular disagreement on values has translated into stagnant executive and legislative efforts that are harmful to the creation of a strategic communications plan and process since there is no special popular pressure or yearning for such. This failure of agreement is reflected in the lack of inter-agency consensus as to what national values are and how they should be advanced, which muddles our attempts to formulate cogent strategic messages and supporting activities aimed at international audiences to explain and justify our involvement in actions associated with the war on terror, especially in Iraq.

Obviously, the solution would be for the branches of government and the executive branch departments in particular to arrive at hard-consensus agreement on a set of national values, which would instantly remove the ideological barriers necessary to foster an interagency sense of urgency and desire for cooperation and action.

Whether agreement on national values is even possible in our turbulent and divided society and government is now the key central issue of this national dilemma. Not only does lack of consensus agreement directly impact our ability to develop a national strategic communications process to support agencies attempting to fight the current wars, but, more ominously, such agreement also is directly relevant to whether we as a nation will be able to survive the “Long War” now taking shape in the face of withering ideological challenges we can expect to those basic national values that have heretofore defined the United States as a nation and its citizens as uniquely American.

Values Then . . .

The last time the United States had a national consensus on values was World War II. Relative agreement on which national values made up the sociopolitical environment of the country created broad popular demand and support for institutions that were created to fight fascism. General popular agreement on national values fostered the environment for interagency cooperation among organizations created to communicate with not only foreign but also domestic publics. One



Senators from New Jersey talk to press about military response to 9/11 attacks

305th Communications Squadron (Carlos Critton)

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consequence of such general agreement was development of a program aimed at promoting domestic support for the war. This program produced such popular icons of national unity as “Rosie the Riveter” and wide support for rationing and the sale of bonds to support the war. It also facilitated support from a historically unruly and independently minded Hollywood, which, holding its nose, nevertheless shared enough buy-in to prevailing national values to mass-produce films that glorified the Allied cause while ridiculing and vilifying the Axis in ways that would be viewed today as culturally intolerant and insensitive. In addition, the historically iconoclastic media grudgingly cooperated by allowing both itself to be censored with minimum grumbling and its reporters to be enrolled as virtual members of the military as they embedded with forward deploying forces.

What were those shared national values? A comprehensive description and discussion of all specific values that might have contributed to the unified national mood of support and cooperation throughout the huge and diverse United States would be extremely complicated to lay out in a taxonomy and would be open to vigorous debate. Specific agreement on each and every expressed value certainly did not exist among the diverse ethnic and minority communities. However, the values of the country overlapped enough

to generate popular support for waging the war and are probably summarized by the period’s fabled aphorism, “For Mom, apple pie, and the girl next door.”

Though no doubt regarded by many even then as sentimental, facile, and ingenuous, this concise statement nevertheless encapsulated a set of values among the American populace that justified the purpose of the war: defending from fascist aggression the traditional nuclear family and preserving peacetime gender roles, with both of these linked to a sense of independent culture and national identity symbolized by a kind of pastry regarded as uniquely American. This is not to suggest that pre-World War II America was an idyllic society. It was deeply flawed by widespread poverty and institutional racism, especially with regard to the treatment of blacks, Asians, and Jews. However, it was a society whose communities—both majority and minority—willingly went to war believing that they had an important stake in the outcome.

In contrast, were anyone in authority today to suggest that the reason we are fighting in Iraq is to defend “Mom, apple pie, and the girl next door,” that individual would be open to accusations of sexism, homophobia, and mean-spirited isolationism opposed to international trade, including apple imports from Chile or Mexico.

In view of the above, one begins to see why Rosie the Riveter is absent today. Against the backdrop of the enigmatic but palpable threat we face from al Qaeda as well as from potential peer adversaries such as China, the reasons why Rosie has not reported for duty should be cause for great alarm both within the military and throughout the citizenry as a whole.

... and Now

Not surprisingly, in contrast to the overtly nationalistic and even racist messages characteristic of the U.S. Government's strategic communications during World War II, the messages of the U.S.-led coalition today are abstract, obsessively inoffensive, and tepid. Some of the main reasons are fairly clear: first, because we live in a world where globalization has created an extremely complex web of interdependent economies, the U.S. Government avoids challenging the ideologies of many nations upon whose resources our economy depends, especially Islamic views (though Islam is clearly the ideological soil from which most of the world's current insurgencies and terrorist movements are springing). Among these reasons is that the United States is utterly dependent on Islamic oil.

But just as importantly, Americans have been subjected to government-sponsored

Clockwise from below: Uncle Sam poster by James Montgomery Flagg for Office of Government Reports; Rosie the Riveter poster by J. Howard Miller for War Production Board; Navy technician explains Med-Eng EOD 8 bomb suit at SEAL Trident Challenge, a Navy-sponsored event in Boston during Navy Week



National Archives

indoctrination through the influence of a host of laws, changes in the educational system, and the influence of popular cultural leaders and institutions that emerged from the 1960s civil rights movement. Because of these cultural changes, many in the U.S. Government today are used to instinctive rejection of anything that might subject them to accusations of ethnic insensitivity, racism, or lack of multicultural tolerance. As a result, many now have a virtually instinctive impulse to avoid challenging any religion or culture, no matter how openly organized or threatening and belligerent such a cultural movement might be to American interests.

The major consequence of these two factors means that U.S. Government officials cannot now come to any agreement among themselves regarding what foreign cultural values we are willing to openly challenge as inferior or counterproductive to the promotion of the kinds of liberal society we previously championed as a matter of national values. In other words, we cannot agree among ourselves as to what we view as those cultural values of our own we are willing to openly



National Archives

assert as superior and preferable to those championed by our enemies as a reason for engaging in war, which by definition must be promoted and internalized by tar-

geted audiences in order for a war of ideas to be successful. Yet the assertion of superiority of values as compared to those of an adversary must be, in fact, the essence of strategic communications messages aimed at achieving wartime political objectives.

In contrast, examining the propaganda produced by our insurgent and terrorist enemies, one is struck not by the enemy's

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skill for devising shrewd programs of ingenious persuasion but rather by the simplicity and concrete expression of specific policy objectives the enemy wants its audiences to internalize. Also, these messages unabashedly claim moral superiority to the values of the United States and its allies. This simplicity stands in glaring contrast to the enigmatic and abstruse content of what usually passes for strategic communications messages on behalf of the U.S.-led coalition.

The upshot is that the single major problem with our strategic communications effort is that there is no strategic message. As a result, no real strategic communications process is now possible no matter what interagency reorganization occurs, or how superbly trained the personnel may be to man them, or how sophisticated and polished our style of communication is manicured to be. Consequently, until there is consensus on national values among all segments of the government and a revival of national moral courage by the government leadership to adopt a much needed measure of cultural intolerance for ideologies that threaten those values, the likelihood of cogent strategic communications in the near future is not great. And recognition of the reasons for the small likelihood brings into relief what should provoke the greatest concern to the military, the people, and government, greater than the threat of global terrorism itself. What is emerging is a war of ideas stemming from different value sets playing out in the *madrasas*, market places, city streets, villages, and mosques of obscure corners of distant lands,



U.S. Navy (Dave Kaylor)

and it is aligning with increasing intensity as an ideological conflict of values within America itself as a fourth revolution.

In its history, the United States has experienced three clear revolutions. The first not only involved breaking away from a mother culture but also introduced the notion that government should serve the people at their pleasure and that the people had natural rights that the government could not take away. However, by failing to abolish slavery, the first revolution failed to adopt the values articulated in its basic declaration. Within a fairly short time, these unresolved issues led to the second revolution, the American Civil War, which settled the issue of slavery and established Federal sovereignty as supreme. However, doing away with slavery did not do away with institutional racial injustice or preclude the passing of laws and the establishment of institutions aimed at keeping blacks and other minorities in a de facto state of involuntary servitude. In time, the illogic of this situation produced the third revolution, led by the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., which resulted in the end of legal segregation and helped establish those national values articulated in the first revolution. Each of these revolutions was primarily a conflict over the direction and substance of national values. And the sociopolitical conditions that fostered each came about in large measure by the social friction produced by a war—the third created in large part by the social unrest stemming from the Vietnam War.

Similarly, today, the broader war that President George W. Bush initiated by invading Iraq has opened up a Pandora's box of still unresolved and long-simmering political and social tensions about the substance of national values. The social pressure of a seemingly intractable war is polarizing in increasingly dangerous ways an already ideologically divided society, moving it toward another virtual domestic civil war among advocates of conflicting ideologies. So advanced is this path of revolutionary movement that the red state versus blue state divide apparent in the last two Presidential elections may be interpreted no longer as a quarrel within the American family, but instead as the harbinger of actual war between irreconcilable camps of ideological enemies who are increasingly gravitating to, if not openly rallying around, two inimical and antithetical sets of values as distinct as those that divide the Shia and Sunni factions in the Islamic world.

As a result, after almost 6 years, it is apparent that the agendas of the domestic political parties have evolved to a point where they view the outcome of the war in Iraq less as an issue of homeland security than as a key factor in the success of their own parochial struggles to wrest domestic political power as a means to shape national values. To this end, domestic political opponents increasingly appear to view the war as more about controlling future nominations to the Supreme Court than about defending American citizens or improving Middle Eastern stability.

The upshot of the dilemma is that in terms of national values, the last general national election showed that a clear majority of citizens, even at opposite sides on the political spectrum, apparently had concluded that more than a decade of Republican-dominated branches of government had produced little more than an increasingly predictable pattern of callous disregard for the public's priorities (that is, the party in power had treated the electorate as chumps). To many, this perception was aggravated by the nagging disparity in the rhetoric of those in office who spoke about expanding and protecting American interests and traditional values, but whose efforts seemed most often in practice to focus on promoting international business interests and international military expeditions that mainly benefited non-Americans.

Moreover, for both the legal citizen standing in a long line at the hospital to pay an expensive medical bill, as well as the many illegal immigrants in front of them whose bills are being paid by the Government, neither can be blamed for not only doubting the seriousness and legitimacy of the administration and Congress in power but also questioning American-style democracy itself as it has evolved. This is an ominous ideological road, but one that the Government has fostered.

Such trends are clearly evident in polls over both recent administrations that show that a majority of U.S. citizens share a conviction that the Government has ignored their priorities and has been more focused on serving special interests in a systematic and even programmatic way. Those who have interpreted the public desire to enforce laws against illegal immigration as a matter of white racism simply miss the point regarding why the vast majority of the American electorate wants the Government to take action to stop the flow: it sees it not mainly as a problem of undocumented workers taking

jobs and clogging public services, but as a mortal challenge to the national value of government by law itself.

With the above in mind, it is clear that no strategic communications effort can succeed unless it grows out of national values that are honored and protected. It should be elementary that a government that wishes to spread the flame of its values to others must first demonstrate regard for its own, while avoiding the perception that it treats disdainfully the constituency whose society is underpinned by such values. To do this, it is essential that the Government take action to articulate national values by defining them and, once they are defined, by sustaining them with forceful application of laws aimed at preserving and promoting them. Values thus defined, and then supported by establishment and enforcement of policies that they reflect, are the necessary bedrock for fostering the desire and willingness among agencies of government to cooperate in developing strategic communications. Without such a foundation of national core values supported by policy and enforcement, any national strategic communications program will be impossible. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ Anthony J. Blinken, "Now the U.S. Needs to Win the Global War of Ideas," *International Herald Tribune*, December 8, 2001; Anthony J. Blinken, "Winning the War of Ideas," *The Washington Quarterly* (Spring 2002), 101–114; Harry Binswanger, "America vs. Death-Worship: The Moral Meaning of the Coming War," speech delivered at Columbia University, October 2, 2001.

² See William P. Kiehl, *America's Dialogue with the World* (Washington, DC: The George Washington University, 2006); Wilson P. Dizard, Jr., *Inventing Public Diplomacy: The Story of the U.S. Information Agency* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2004); Walter L. Hixon, *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture, and the Cold War, 1945–1961* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997); David Chute, *The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy During the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: Free Press, 2002).

³ Council on Foreign Relations, "New Realities in the Media Age: A Conversation with Donald Rumsfeld," transcript, February 17, 2006.

⁴ National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States* (New York: Norton, 2004), 376.